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UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

DATE: 1984

FRESH HORSES

By

Bain Robinson

B.A., Concordia College, 1974

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1984

Approved by:

Wm. Pitt Root

Chairman, Board of Examiners

McCormack
Dean, Graduate School

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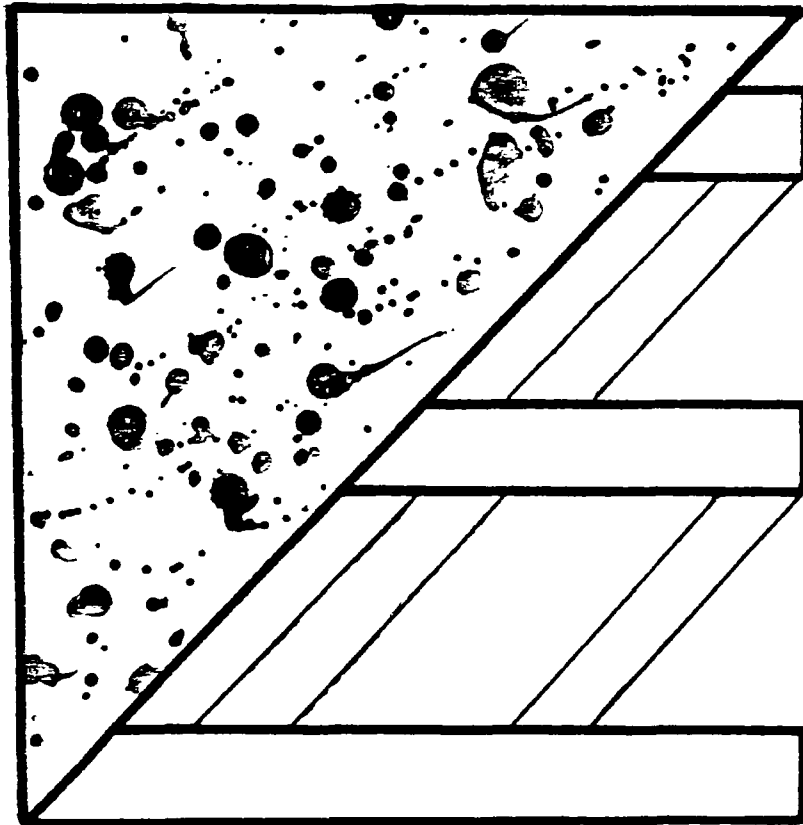
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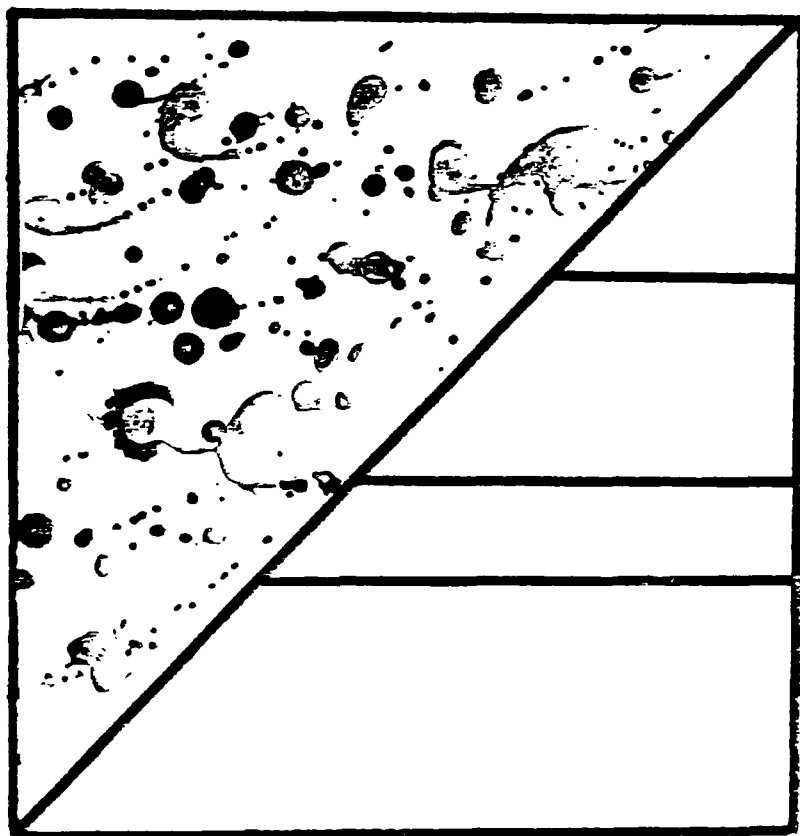


By
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Graphics: Vickie Robinson

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Brandon Colors Inside The Lines

Green person, yellow person, Brandon says,
scratches crayon across the page.

Pink is a good color for girls, his mother says,
stay inside the lines.

Ilene, behind her reception desk,
tricks him asking about yellow people,
gives him a kiss.
Shall we hang yours on the wall, she asks.

Which one's your favorite, he says, looking at rows of
cut-out pages on the wall.
Oh, they're all my favorites!, Ilene replies. Now,
which can we take down to make some room. . .

She pulls one off, whirls it,
without looking, into the garbge.

Brandon stares. Hand me yours, she says.

Voices In The Cutting Room

The black sky merged with the harbor
beyond the plaza and the city's
umbrella of reflected light. The Hudson
emptying worked at his brain
like water at the rough and crevice
of a stone. He felt the point
where all perspective disappears,
moving within reach.

The Trade Towers stood before him,
movie screens catching the instance
of his life in the huge detail
of his thoughts:
old, old women speaking native tongues;
words and their varied meanings;
hostilities turned to violence.
He began scraping cracked,
yellow varnish away
from each sequence, scene and frame
looking cleanly at them
deleting entirely the obvious
ones, the totally obscure.

The entire plaza whispered
to the Hudson: so many displaced
voices each with its myriad
tones railing against
the night's purge.
Finally the shards of the past
merged without crack or seam

projecting a future void
of expectation, blank
and filled with softest light.
He closed his eyes, slowed his pulse,
walked between the Towers to the
point where the river shudders meeting
the larger harbor and the sea.

After Shopping

You'd sacrifice this imported smoke,
this new music,
late summer and all of fall,
for snow.

A skiff of powder
for these soft leather boots.

And I wish
the afternoon away,
its heat and thunderstorms,
for darkness,
a spark for light of new candles,
you and those black boots
in flame and shadow.

New Year's Eve: Brooklyn

She moved lightly against you
 barely touching silk and smoother,
and lucidly drugged in the festive
 walls of darkness
while city cowboys whispered
 love,
 love,
with their soft hands, bedclothes faces.

We do live on. . .

one heartbeat providing momentum for the next.
The rumored checkpoints, hostile occupations
fade as mirage when we approach.
Somehow, inexplicable, we are free
to catch next wind pulling at our shoulder sockets,
testing wind throwing us upward.

If Stephen sees the cards correctly--
each voice tells me he does--
and if we were, you and I, of the same spark
in that other life, then
our flight feathers must be the same,
hatched through that shell together.

Arcs, waves, loops,
the round moon crossing, re-crossing,
these are passive if alone
yet add precise momentum to this flight.
Now, with our days and nights
marked out along the inside rail
I see that straight lines do not exist.

Prophecy/Mexico

You and I, almost identical,
identical once, move out of past darkness
close together, farther apart,
threads in fabric
attaching us like an ancient people
to this place,
this sun and moon, once again.

Work on this city goes slowly, spreading,
receding, tools outlasting individual flesh.
The trowel's handle comes back
to its maker's perfect hand-hold.
There is no need to hurry
the silent dripping, its weave inside of bone.
We have come far already. The veil is distant,
and the first sparked pools, where gods watched
our fingers rise and pull at air
lie behind that scrim of haze.

At this cafe light breaks
across our features like unfinished sculpture
breaks light. This recurring pictograph of
you and I, this hieroglyphic city,
shows me these threads leave here entwined
as lovers' fingers laced.
Shows me we arrive again at light
of each other's original cell,
the pool where spinning fingers rise,
the level which fills to overflowing.

Innocent Missoula Jump-Rope

The circle snaps closed
and your seven years are caught
in the shrunken center of noose
clawing, kicking, blue,
black, still air
in torrid August light.
You are alone, and surprised
how quiet the afternoon.
From a point slowly ever higher,
you watch your body,
the monkey bars,
your red jump rope
while the breeze moves your dress,
and leaves it hanging still.

(Dream) Pose For Edie

You're never out of touch here at center
where all media converge
upon the carrion. Never are you
over-and-out, the airwaves
are always alive, and
cameras record your time in frames
around the clock. You would never
give up those games of jealousy,
pull your finger off the pulse,
or leave those mirror walls to reflect
merely themselves across the emptiness.
You told me what those shuttered
eyes, that voice detached in
commanding darkness just beyond the set,
meant to you. It was your
veins' ignition,
your skin's phosphorescent glow,
a needle without release.

Now there is someone watching you
from inside every reflective surface,
slowly looking like you,
with eyes which never close.
Is it a young, or an old voice now,
poised
as a reflection is
ready to move,
saying my name
over and over while I lie
draining in this tub,

detached myself,
thinking over
over and out break the connection?

Clark Kent Surveys The Kansas Sky, 1959

Clark Kent, reporter, tired of
the manual typewriter present,
the streamlined suits and hats.
But the modern world was nothing
in the face of George Reeves.
Both could imagine a nose dive
through George's skyscraper
window of vulnerability
with a head-full of stone.
Clark holds the sash now with one hand,
holds George's belt with the other
against the marrow's urge to fly.

Folded to a supersonic point
and thrown from his office window,
Clark's press pass broke the sound barrier,
shattered glass all over mid-town.
No way I'm flying, Clark thought,
and rode the train to Kansas,
forgetting the wind's siren voice
in the singing of the rails.
But George envied grain elevators,
the windy catwalks,
threw his small weight up ladders
to highest point,
to thinnest air, least resistance.

Revolution Shuffle

Saturday afternoon and the zoo,
you and your children,
across the hum of Central Park West.
Your summer habit is to
parade in your stylish camouflage and flight boots,
to thick smells of decay, a different animal weight
than any other in this city.

Beneath jungle-hill palms
2,000 miles away
heels of hands on drums.
Rebels control the highway
narrows against the sea.
And the Colonel,
home again Manhattan
from rebel front lines
to shoot shampoo ads,
further bankroll the revolution,
walks his entourage along 6th Avenue,
Avenue of the Americas.

When the kids have had enough
of monkey, elephant, and snake,
and shadows run together with your clothes,
you ride the elevator home.
Rosa will be back from the market
with something cold for you on ice.
You'll settle in the blue-glow
television room, glass in hand,
boots in closet,
and watch the exploding bus
narrowly miss the shampoo Colonel and

disintegrate Rosa
whom you won't recognize
on the nightly news.

spending money

on long island
catch thursday girls,
over a quick joint
between classes in the can,
planning city nights

"along 42nd street--
which corners/which nights,

do black men really
pay more for white girls"

Sleight Of Hand

Magicians inhabit all these rooms
 (silk hat and tails
 nothing up either sleeve)
performing feats of love
 changing it into white
 rabbits and doves flying
 into the wings
White-gloved hands whisking love
 away until the hands alone
remain and fingers must be their own
 consolation on the black stage

And there's something unnerving even
 about my own reflection
a shuffled deck of cards spread
 in a mirror
 all the face cards showing

Finishing Touches

Where are you this morning Leonard
when winter's cocoon
releases butterflies wet winged
from dreams of flight?
It would be Europe, no doubt.
Europe with its old wine, decaying church,
Stonehenge fenced off.
A hotel room's wrought iron balcony,
your companion the silhouette
against this early morning light.
There is always a woman;
one of statuesque legs who rises
early and fresh from your sleepless night.
And you, hair splayed on this hotel
pillow case, miss this morning
in trade for another night.
Bells ring keeping you awake till noon
when the chant of final mass begins.
Already the night clerk comes
with calls you cannot return.
Your companion reaches for her clothes;
it is almost time to move.

My Career In Telephone Sales

I'd get the most sales, they said,
if I imagined myself a fireman
talking on the phone, and at the same time
polishing my engine,
shining up the door
or a fender.
For the second part
they took me 'round the corner for a few beers.
So I'd sound like a fireman, is what they said.

Trysting The Night Away In Queens

While Wanda and I leaned
 against each other on the white shag rug
 the doberman in the corner sat watching
us listening to the daughter's records.
 Wanda was catching the beat
 sweating to the music's heat.

I was coming down with second thoughts
 thinking about the glorious girls on the mall,
 their legs and skirts and nails.

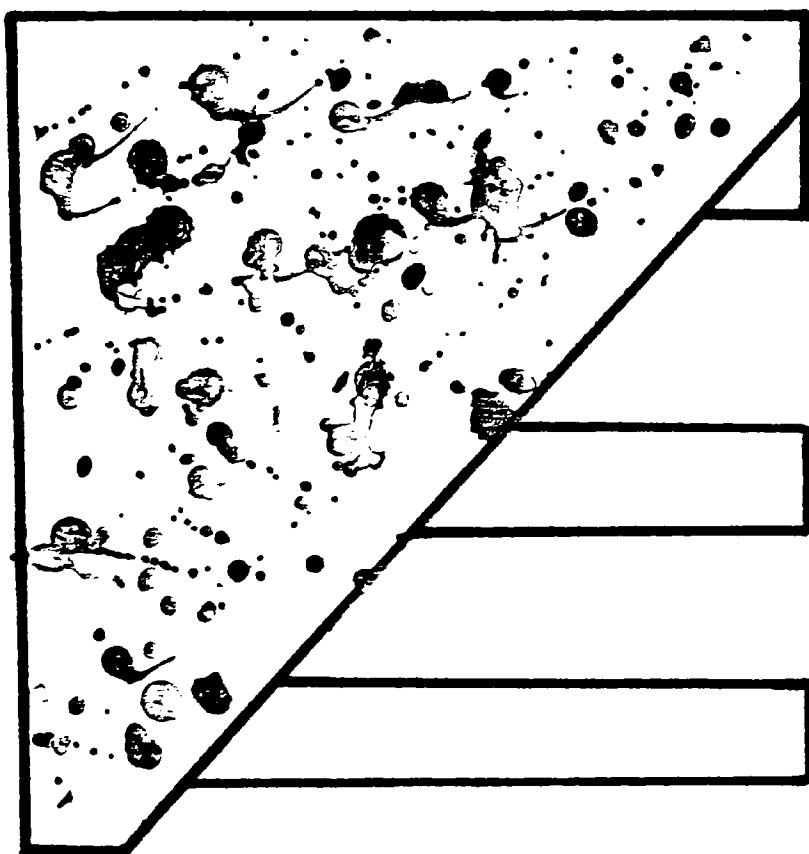
According to the clock it was still early.
 Wanda danced, and a spot came on.
 Grapes rose at my hand in bunches of shining skin.

I had to look away and
 followed the writhing shadow's back-and-forth eclipse
 in and out of the light

while stealing glances at the daughter's glossy
 photo above the doberman ready on the floor.
 When I returned the dancing had gotten obscene.

I wondered if the dog were next,
 he was looking slicker all the time;
 whether my red shorts wouldn't have been better. . .

It was no longer a question of coming and going,
 I'd been taken over, I had to stay,
 till way after the young one came in.



The Armageddon Walk

It starts anywhere,
this pilgrimage of stuffed cars
trickles off the highway,
through Missoula,
up the valley to the south.
God only knows how many
churches in the Bitterroot
and each of these folks want
a stiff white farmhouse of their own
to wait in, readying water filters,
oiling boots for the final trek
into wilderness.
This is only the beginning
for the power of the Sixes grows
and the wind of Second Coming.
Many more begin sluffing possessions
hoping to make the walk
into perfect air Blodgett canyon,
into radiance of God's uplifted arms.
They are quite evident
once your eyes accustom to the light
these angels on tips of certain mountains
who admit the chosen
on the day cleansed with fire.

Grass On Countless Hills

Orange on black in the night
the lightning fire on Eastman ridge burned
like threads in Harold's jacket.
Anne and I had watched from north of the creek
flames etching darkness above us
across the water's voice.
She had imagined the cabin's white ash blowing
in the twisted orchard. The rows of trees
crippled by bear's claws and weight.

Two summers before, Harold's stories
told for the last times
and I had driven south on the lake road
bringing his ashes home.
The sage broke over the ridge tops
jumping to shore;
the cracked rock sinking to soil.
And I could see Harold,
his boots spurred in stirrups
bracing his body downhill;
a million rattlers, all at once,
a sea across the prairie;
the grass on countless hills he owned
and drank acre by acre
until even his legs were gone.

Late spring I'd ride fences through
the gulch and bottoms, across side canyons
and the backs of their ridges
through brush and clearings
before the cows were turned out.

This year I lifted deer's light bones
off the barbed strands
running north of Gibbons Creek
settling them on crushed granite soil
and bunch grass.

And then I rode the trail up out of Eastman
past trillium and last snow
under the bank of winter
to the spot where the cabin burned.
The wall logs were gone,
burned white feathers carried away on wind,
a black square of earth the only mark
of that cabin whose name the mountain knew.
This was how Harold started, a bedroll in the open,
a fire and quiet dinner, sleeping in his boots.
And his jacket, orange threads on black,
which Anne gave me because it fit.

I picked yarrow stalks,
dry and brown they'd stood through winter,
for kindling and because
they grow on the grave of Confucius--
the other side of the world.

Looking For Great-Grandmother Harkey
Across Eastern Montana With Paul Trower

You said everything looked right as
we stopped at an unmarked creek,
the bridge and its iron railings,
after zig-zagging for hours on end.
Only a trickle ran.

Photographs of the frame house were what you
knew of the tree pushing up to keep rooms
cool July and August. Your mother the only
living relative who'd been there.

With your camera, its lenses and filters,
you'd create the perfect light
silver, white, grey, black.

A tone of hopelessness escaped
the water and rock at our feet.

Then, with the sun lowering, a tree,
and you were sure, this was the spot.
No dooryard bramble propping picket fence,
no root cellar slowly filling.

But the tree. It shone, twisted against
nothing at all.

You added and subtracted the camera, stood
where the front door must have been,
welcomed all in.

I opened shutter after shutter,
memorizing places silver goes to white,
to grey, to black, to silver.

Calendar: Willow Creek

Seasons are marked by
identifying emblems of natural
and not so.
I follow the scars and healings
in their haphazard paths:
ditch bank broken cuts the hill,
pine, grass, soil,
all gravel-flecked
piled as the loose water left it;
wire-peeled flaps of skin
on mare's foreleg,
where she stood shivering
in darkness before dawn.
And I mark them in my head
thinking I'll recall this one surely,
or that one, and years to come
when every other face and name
along the creek is new
the seasons will pass through
me to those new arrivals
as Marion now keeps the almanacs
of new plowings,
of stone worn away
for those of us who know not
what to tally nor why.

But I cannot remember
as Marion does

highwater in '36 and the creek
piled brush against the fences,
from here to Kalberg's;

thunderheads and orange sunset
a month early in '47,
corn silk prophetic in its thick
insulation beneath the husks
and winter hit without feeling,
the air cold enough to crack
if its purchase could be found.

I could divine from date
humming birds arrive
something of the future,
something of the past
in the bird's numerology.
But this season--
how mark a process which never patterns,
like a nonrepeating decimal continues forever?
I remain conscious, full in my face,
for such short periods.
This year I'll scratch the ground
around plant stalks,
watch seeds fall into the shallow beds,
cover them with my hands.

(Impression) Coloma, MT 1982

Moonlight, smooth lover's skin,
silk, black silk, and silver,
penumbrae sliding like fingertips in water,
a miner's touch on ghost town veins.

Solstice

From this point above the river ice
I feel my link to a reptile past.
Arc lights bridge that water with shadow,
and hum like cicadas
south on Texas roads to Mexico.
My blood runs slowly this time of year.

Drive across the cactus desert
in your khaki cap and underwear.
Count the bugs, the miles, the night,
with curses.
Count the guns beneath the floor.

Here the ridge tops are deep in snow
and glow a flameless fire.
The full moon soaks through
porous skin to bone.
I toss awake up high
where horses scrape away the snow,
forage frozen seed and stem.

Trains/Departure Time

Down through brush
along Grey Horse Creek
slips the abandoned railroad grade,
disappearing where bank is fallen in or overgrown.
I've walked the one remaining rail,
heard the narrow gauge engine's whistle
echoed off bunch grass canyon walls
as empty ore cars pushed up
and rode the brake back down.
How the sound fused with rock, pick,
voice and water,
harness and slipscoop in dirt and stone.

And if I could climb rungs into the cab
and ride down out of the hills
feeling steam test the gauges,
I could get off in town,
cross the yard to the station house
and stand on Main Street with my
jacket slung on my shoulder
in the small town Johnny Carrol
built to scale, placed on a plywood board,
outgrew, and left behind at our house.
It was a town never named:
glass windows in tiny wooden sashes
set in perfectly plumb walls carefully painted;
street lights pooling board sidewalks
in the darkness; a steam express
its green coaches lit and rocking.

Here, today, five valleys feed this one
their streams, creeks, and rivers,
their twin rails of track
bringing timber to be cut and planed.
Here, in the roundhouse center
of these spur lines and rivers
are fourteen diesels
coupled to an oil and grease idle;
their hydraulics, computer linked, flex together,
relax as one, speak in exhalation.
The closest commuter stop now
is one hundred miles north over the mountains
and the train runs twice a week.
This yard makes the freights up after dark;
the box car thunder,
the diesels working back and forth
in their low vibration
remain subliminal and sweet.

But here, now, by one and two's
the brothers are gathering.
Back packs, water jugs, a dog,
as if by predestination,
a guitar, and a song,
waiting for dark, light in pools along the street,
and a westbound departure.

Salt In Water

Thaw continues this morning
admidst flurry snow.
Water drips off eaves tapping
small explosions as billions
of molecules expand out of ice.
Wet air fills my mouth,
its weight, my lungs.

This ringing in your ear,
spilled echoes
only a universe could stage,
is surely the soul of our detonation,
our own presence passing
through quiet rooms full of flowers giving voice.

These acts are final, continuous,
light and dark, thaw and freeze.
It is mistaken that I should silence
these tears of yours
when we recognize each other by taste
of salt in water,
and this wet air is full of bits of tears.

Equinox: The Balance Of Night And Day

Winter holds the chipped mountain tops
in a loosening grip, the hills soften
to body shapes and in a pasture of forty horses
only the paint raises its head.

At night the hunter in clear sky
trails the full moon up this canyon,
the owl's voice weaves around its prey.
These pitched walls of stone canyon, layers of rock

stood on end like your father's life rips against
cancer's broken spike: it's so very far
from the grave back to these eyes when the canyon is white
and silver and unreachable in its snow and storms

and the valley shows plows peeling
black soil, white-face calves across the fields.

Anatomy Lesson

Flying clouds push sun
through these rooms in patches.
In waves dry snow rattles
against the outside walls,
melts in the next sun-flash.
The cat slides lightly from sill
to shawl-covered chair
in this fickle afternoon,
a day the oven
should fill the house
with sharp yeast, rising bread.
Out east windows
plastic sheets covering porch screens
suck in, pause,
blow out, while air leaks through
rips and rends
in the huge lung;
or translucent heart
beating
without drop of red blood life.

In The Clockworks

Even with these hands pointing precisely,
the now is illusive, elusive,
and the natural misunderstood
here where we throw all things at hand
into gears hoping to stop the wheels' turning,
asking for what has been granted:
a little more time. We expect
the river to stop around our legs
so we might see, exploring up
and down its banks, a true reflection.
We brace ourselves against this
flow of fragments
against the river's desire to move,
nourish the earth and spread as air.

Wind leaves its wet rust
on the steel of my life,
ascends dry again through this liquid air.